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Literal Belief in the Bible Declining in U.S.

Biblical literalism, the belief that the Bible represents the actual Word of God in all instances, once was the overwhelming view of Americans, but has been declining rapidly over the last 25 years.

Currently, one American in three (32 percent) still believes that the Bible represents the actual Word of God, to be taken literally, word for word. Half of the public (49 percent) views the Bible as the inspired Word of God, but that it should not be interpreted as being literally true in every instance. Just 16 percent of adults regard the Bible as nothing more than a book of ancient fables, legends, history, and moral precepts, that was written by man rather than the representation or inspiration of God.

The current proportion of Biblical literalists in the U.S. population is only half of what it was as recently as in 1963, when 65 percent of Americans said they believed in the absolute truth of all words in the Bible. Within 15 years, by 1978, the proportion of the population holding this belief had declined to 38 percent. The current figure of 32 percent represents a new low in literal belief in the Bible.

This does not mean that the American public is totally abandoning its belief in the truth of the Bible. Between 1963 and 1991, the number of those who view the Bible as nothing more than an ancient chronicle of myths and precepts has grown only slightly, from 11 percent to 16 percent.

The most prevalent view of the Bible now is that it is inspired by God, but contains passages that should not be interpreted literally, word for word. This view of the Bible was held by only 18 percent of the public in 1963, but found acceptance among 45 percent by 1978.

Changes in the educational levels of the general population in recent years would appear to account for a large part of the variance in biblical beliefs. Currently, for example, biblical literalists are most likely to be found among people who did not complete high school (58 percent). Growth in the belief that the Bible represents the inspired Word of God matches the spread of higher education among the general public, with a majority of high school graduates and college attendees taking this view. College graduates (29 percent) are those most likely to reject claims that the Bible is either the literal or inspired word of God.

Only in the South does a plurality of 46 percent of the adult population continue to believe in the literal truth of the Bible. This reflects the high concentration of several groups in the South who maintain much-higher-than-average belief in biblical literalness – Southern Baptists (60 percent, compared to 49 percent of the members of other Baptist denominations) and evangelical Christians (59 percent, compared to 14 percent of non-evangelicals).

Protestants are somewhat more likely than Catholics to interpret the Bible literally, by a margin of 39 percent to 24 percent. Within the body of the Protestant belief, non-whites (54 percent) more often than whites (36 percent) say they are Biblical literalists.

The results are based on telephone interviews with a randomly selected national sample of 1,005 adults, 18 years and older, conducted November 21-24, 1991. For results based on samples of this size, one can say with 95 percent confidence that the error attributable to sampling and other random effects could be plus or minus 3 percentage points.

Many Americans Hold Belief in "Creationism"

Since the 19th Century when Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* and, especially, *The Descent of Man*, were first published, the theories they embodied have been bitterly opposed by religious fundamentalists in this country. Fundamentalists maintain that the biblical accounts in Genesis of the creation of man and his world and the preservation of all species, including man, in the story of Noah and his ark, are literally true. Accordingly, they believe that all forms of life were created within the last 10,000 years or so.

The scientific community, both in this country and worldwide, totally rejects this notion. It accepts Darwinian theory as the best available and traces the creation of the world and the universe to billions of years ago, and of man and his antecedents to millions of years ago.

"Creationists", as proponents of the literalist view are known, have sought in vain to ban the teaching of evolutionary theory in the nation's schools. In recent years they have worked instead to require the teaching of "creationism" as an alternative scientific theory. Laws adopted by some states to meet this requirement have been universally struck down by state and federal courts as a violation of the principle of the separation of church and state, with the courts holding that the theory of creationism has no scientific validity but is a matter solely of religious faith.

Despite the opposition of both science and law, nearly half of the adult population of the United States (46 percent) currently maintains the belief that "God created man pretty much in his present form at one time within the last 10,000 years."

Only one person in 10 (9 percent) goes to the opposite extreme and maintains that "man has developed over millions of years from less advanced forms of life and God had no part in this process."

A median position held by four adults in 10 (40 percent) states that "man has developed over millions of years from less advanced forms of life, but God guided this process, including man's creation." The remaining 5 percent of the population are undecided on the matter.

There is a very strong correlation between the level of education and belief in creationism. Two persons in three (66 percent), who failed to complete high school, hold to the literal view of creation theory. Among college graduates only one person in four (25 percent) sees the biblical account of the act of creation as being literally true. The majority of college graduates (54 percent) think instead that the act of creation has spanned millions of years and has been guided by God. College graduates, however, are also the most likely (16 percent) to believe creation took place without divine intervention.

Women are more likely than men to view creation in the literal biblical sense, by a margin of 53 percent to 39 percent. Protestant believers in creationism outnumber Catholics by a margin of 53 percent to 42 percent. As might be expected, evangelical Protestants (70 percent) number among those most likely to hold creationist beliefs. Among the major Protestant denominations, Baptists most often hold this view, but Southern Baptists (56 percent) are slightly outnumbered in this respect by other Baptists (61 percent) as literal believes in the act of creation.

A majority of those who consider religion very important in their lives (65 percent), who attended religious services recently (62 percent), and who are church members (53 percent) are also believers in the creationist view of the origin of human life.

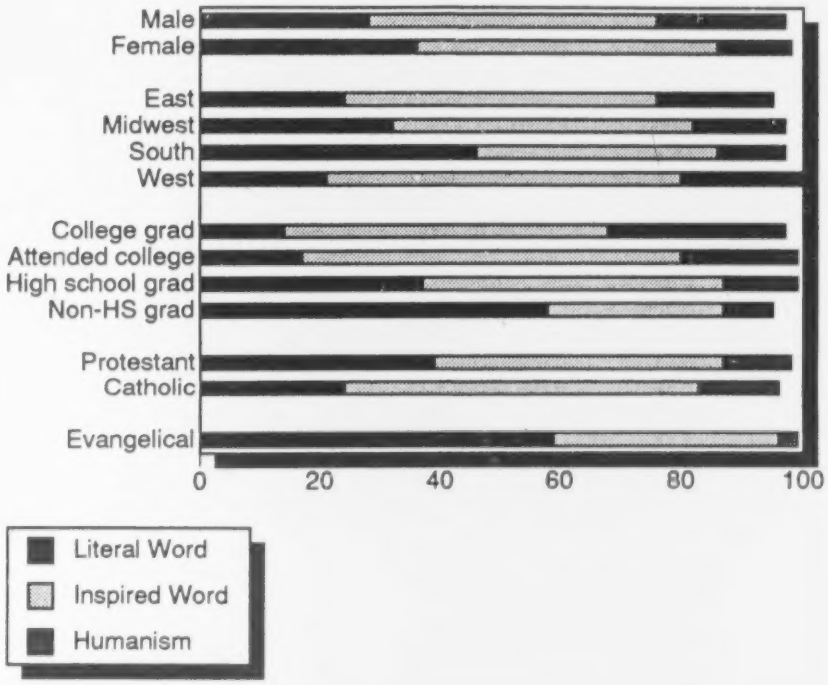
Teens Give Churches Passing Grades on Fighting AIDS

About half of the nation's teens give their local places of worship a rating of excellent (18 percent) or good (30 percent) for the job they are now doing to fight AIDS. By comparison, 57 percent gave excellent or good ratings to schools and 40 percent gave an excellent or good rating to the local community.

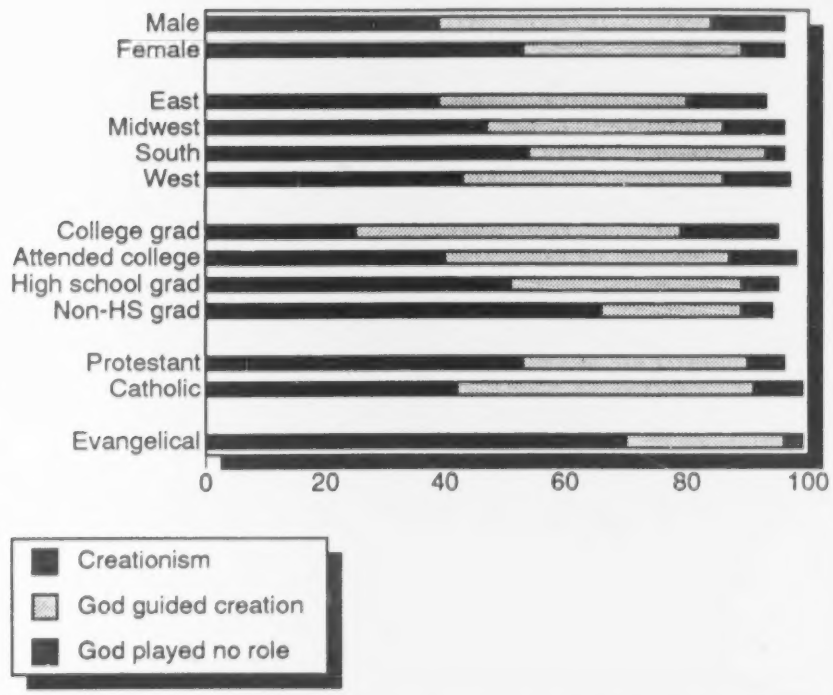
Less impressed by local churches are 25 percent of teens who say they are doing only a fair job and 17 percent who feel their efforts to deal with AIDS are poor.

Protestant teens (56 percent) are more likely than Catholic youth (42 percent) to give their churches positive grades. This may suggest that some teen-age Catholics are disagreeing with the way conservative elements in their church are approaching the AIDS question.

Biblical Beliefs



God's Role in Creating Man



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Religion Has Impact on Teen Attitudes Towards AIDS

Religious practice has had an impact on the way teens approach the serious questions of sexual morality in our age. Condom distribution to students and "safe sex" already were highly controversial topics among the nation's young people, but the recent events surrounding the announcement by Earvin "Magic" Johnson that he has the AIDS virus has intensified the debate.

Johnson's early remarks about safe sex may have struck a responsive chord, because, before his announcement, many teens had already strongly endorsed the free distribution of condoms at the nation's high schools. Nearly half of all teens who are recent church attenders (47 percent) said they very much supported condom distribution, while slightly more of those not attending (54 percent) agreed. Little change in opinion was noted after the Johnson announcement.

Although the Catholic church is strongly opposed to the use and distribution of condoms, Catholic teens (44 percent) are only slightly less likely than Protestant youths (49 percent) to say they very much support the idea.

Teens, however, did show increased interest in having counseling centers where young people could be urged to postpone intimate sexual relations until after marriage. Before the Johnson announcement 43 percent of church attenders very much supported the centers, and after the announcement support grew to 49 percent of the young people. Few non-attenders (16 percent) gave strong support to the establishment of sexual counseling centers, but after Johnson's announcement, their support nearly doubled to 27 percent. The proposed centers, which some critics have derided as "chastity centers," currently receive stronger support from Protestant teens (46 percent) than from Catholic teens (61 percent).

When asked if they believed public education efforts to reduce the spread of AIDS among young people should focus more on encouraging them to practice safe sex or to abstain from sex, the majority of teens, overall, chose the safe sex approach. Recent church goers were most likely to favor the abstinence approach (39 percent), but even among this group, a majority of 55 percent said teaching about safe sex should be emphasized. Among non-recent attenders, safe sex is chosen over abstinence by a three-to-one ratio (74 percent to 22 percent).

The results are based on telephone interviews with randomly selected national samples of teens, 13 through 17, taken before and after the Magic Johnson announcement. The first survey, consisting of 513 interviews, was conducted during the period of June 26 to July 2, 1991, and the most recent survey consisted of 504 interviews and was conducted during the period of November 20-26, 1991.

TEENS AND AIDS

	Church attender	Non-attender	Protestant	Catholic
Very much support free distribution of condoms at high school	45%	53%	49%	44%
Very much support sexual counseling centers	49	27	46	31
Public education should emphasize...				
Safe sex	55	74	62	61
Abstinence	39	22	31	35
Very concered that I will get AIDS	35	34	28	34
Have changed behavior because of risk of AIDS	26	20	22	29
Thinking about changing behavior	11	12	11	7

Religious Figures are Prominent in Lists of "Most Admired"

Evangelist Billy Graham recently celebrated his 73rd birthday, and for nearly half of those years he has been the most durable figure in over 40 years of "most admired man" audits by the Gallup Poll. He has been named 35 times by the nation's adults as one of the 10 men in the world they admire the most. His presence on the top-10 lists has been so consistent over the years, that when the polls are all tallied together, he stands at the head of the list of men the American public has admired over the past four decades. In the most recent survey, taken at the conclusion of 1991, Graham was seventh on the list.

Pope John Paul II, whose reign now has spanned two decades, ranks fifth on the all-time list. Despite his unpopularity with some Catholic Americans, in the 1991 Gallup Poll, he was in sixth place on the list of most admired men.

The Rev. Jesse Jackson, who has been on the list for many years, is currently number 10. It seems likely, however, that most of his votes are earned as a result of his role as a political, social, and civil rights leader, rather than as a religious figure.

Mother Theresa of Calcutta is the only female religious figure to have appeared on the most admired lists over the years. In 1991, she was second only to Barbara Bush among the women Americans said they admire the most. Throughout the 1980s decade she was second only to Margaret Thatcher among women throughout the world who were most admired by Americans.

TEENS OFTEN DISAGREE

Despite the prominence of religious figures on the most-admired lists named by adults, teens more often choose secular figures. Most conspicuous by his absence on the teen list has been Billy Graham who has never appeared among the top 10. In 1991, he failed to gain any votes from the teens.

Pope John Paul II at first was accorded a prominent place by teens, and was actually first on their list in 1979. But by 1988, he ranked only tenth. Since that time he has not appeared on the top-10 list. In the most recent survey he received only a single vote.

Jesse Jackson, having been very popular among teens in the past, failed, for the first time, to make an appearance on their top-10 list for 1991.

Mother Theresa has been a consistent figure on the teen lists of women they admire the most and in 1991 was ninth on their list. When the results of the surveys for the previous decade are combined, Mother Theresa ranks third among the women of the world that teens said they most admire.

SURVEY METHODOLOGY

Survey respondents in these studies are asked to name their choices without being given a list of names. Popularity is determined by combining the first and second choices obtained by asking the following questions:

"Which man (woman) that you have heard or read about, alive today in any part of the world, do you admire most? Who is your second choice?"

The most recent results for adults, age 18 and older, were obtained from telephone interviews with a nationwide sample of 1,004 conducted between December 5 and 8, 1991. The teens' list is based on telephone interviews with a representative national cross section of 504 teenagers, ages 13 through 17, conducted between November 20 and 26, 1991.

MOST ADMIRED MEN–1991

(first and second choices of adults combined)

1. George Bush
2. Terry Anderson
3. Norman Schwarzkopf
4. Mikhail Gorbachev
5. Magic Johnson
6. Pope John Paul II
7. Billy Graham
8. Ronald Reagan
9. Jesse Jackson (tie)
   Michael Jordan

MOST ADMIRED WOMEN–1991

(first and second choices of adults combined)

1. Barbara Bush
2. Mother Theresa
3. Margaret Thatcher
4. Nancy Reagan
5. Oprah Winfrey
6. Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis
7. Elizabeth Taylor
8. Queen Elizabeth
9. Sandra Day O'Connor
10. Betty Ford

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